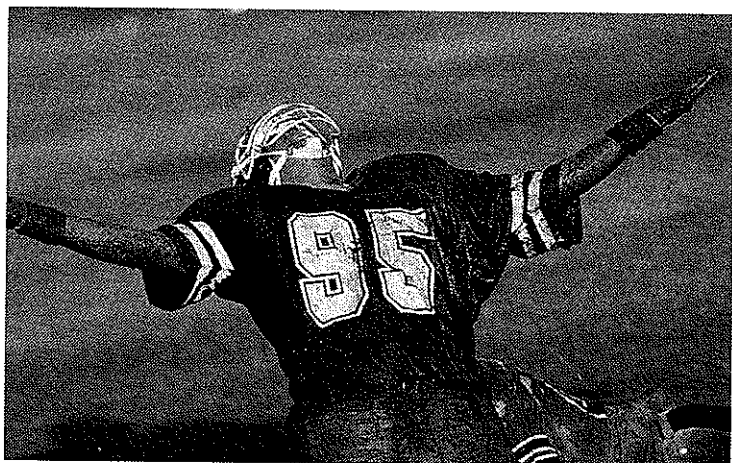


CLUSTER THREE

Is Winning Everything?

Thinking Skill INFERRING





DYING TO WIN

MERRELL NODEN

Christy Henrich's fiancé, Bo Moreno, loved her for her sweet side, but he also knew her demons. That's why, when Henrich's parents were preparing to check her into the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, for treatment of her eating disorders, Moreno warned them to inspect her suitcase carefully. "It had a false bottom," he says. "She had lined the entire bottom of the suitcase with laxatives. That was part of her addiction." Henrich weighed 63 pounds at the time.

At another treatment center about a year later, the staff had to confine her to a wheelchair to prevent her from running everywhere in an attempt to lose weight. "Another part of the addiction," says Moreno. "Constant movement. Anything to burn calories."

At the peak of her career as a world-class gymnast, the 4'10" Henrich weighed 95 pounds. But when she died on July 26, eight days past her 22nd birthday, of multiple organ failure at Research Medical Center in Kansas City, she was down to 61 pounds. And that actually represented improvement. On July 4, the day she was discharged from St. Joseph's (Missouri) Medical Center, she had weighed 47 pounds.

"She was getting intensive supportive care," says Dr. David McKinsey, who treated Henrich during the last week of her life, the final three days of which were spent in a coma. "But a person passes the point of no return, and then, no matter how aggressive the care is, it doesn't work. The major problem is a severe lack of fuel. The person becomes so malnourished that the liver doesn't work, the kidneys don't work, and neither do the muscles. The cells no longer function."

Henrich had been in and out of so many hospitals over the past two years that Moreno lost count of them. Her medical bills ran to more than \$100,000. There were occasional periods of hope, when she would gain weight and seem to be making progress. But for the most part, as Henrich herself told Dale Brendel of *The Independence [Missouri] Examiner*, "my life is a horrifying nightmare. It feels like there's a beast inside me, like a monster. It feels evil."

Henrich's funeral was held at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Independence. Her pink casket sat at the front of the church as several hundred mourners filed in. Some were fellow gymnasts; some were friends and relatives; some were former classmates at Fort Osage High, where Henrich had been a straight-A student. In his eulogy Moreno asked those present to do what most people had always had trouble doing when Henrich was alive: to think of her as more than just a gymnast. "She was a talented artist and an unbelievable cook," he said. "But I must admit, her favorite hobby was shopping, for herself and others. . . ."

Eating disorders are easily the gravest health problem facing female athletes, and they affect not just gymnasts but also swimmers, distance runners, tennis and volleyball players, divers and figure skaters. According to the American College of Sports Medicine, as many as 62 % of females competing in "appearance" sports (like figure skating and gymnastics) and endurance sports suffer from an eating disorder. Julie Anthony, a touring tennis pro in the 1970s who now runs a sports-fitness clinic in Aspen, Colorado, has estimated that 30 % of the women on the tennis tour suffer from some type of eating affliction. Peter Farrell, who has been coaching women's track and cross-country at Princeton for 17 years, puts the number of women runners with eating disorders even higher. "My experience is that 70 % of my runners have dabbled in it in its many hideous forms."

Eating disorders, however, are by no means limited to athletes. The Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders reported before a U.S. Senate subcommittee hearing that 18 % of females in the U.S. suffer from eating disorders. The illnesses tend to strike women who, like Henrich, are perfectionists, and they often seize those who seem to be the most successful. In 1983 singer Karen Carpenter died following a long battle with eating disorders, and for years Princess Diana waged a well-publicized fight against bulimia.

Girls or women who suffer from depression or low self-esteem are particularly susceptible to eating disorders, as are victims of sexual abuse. The expectations of society, particularly those regarding beauty, also play a role. Not coincidentally, the ideal of the perfect female body has changed dramatically in the past several decades. Marilyn Monroe, as she sashayed¹ away from Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis in *Some Like It Hot*, looked like "Jell-O on springs." Lemmon's description was a compliment in 1959. A decade later it would make most women cringe.

Given the importance that sport attaches to weight—and, in the subjectively judged sports, to appearance—it isn't surprising that eating disorders are common among athletes. Nor is it surprising that they exact a far greater toll among women than men. In a 1992 NCAA² survey of collegiate athletics, 93% of the programs reporting eating disorders were in women's sports. It is true that some male athletes—wrestlers, for example—use extreme methods of weight loss, but there is an important difference between these and the self-starvation practiced by anorexics. A wrestler's perception of his body is not distorted. When he is not competing, he can return to a healthy weight. That is not the case with anorexics, trapped as they are behind bars they can't see.

A study conducted a few years ago at Penn found that while both men and women tend to be unrealistic about how others perceive their bodies, men's perceptions tend to be distorted positively, while women's are more likely to be negative. . . .

"Men grow into what they're supposed to be," says Mary T. Meagher, the world-record holder in the 100- and 200-meter butterfly events. "They're supposed to be big and muscular. A woman's body naturally produces more fat. We grow away from what we're supposed to be as athletes."

Though laymen tend to lump anorexia and bulimia together—perhaps because experimentation with bulimia often leads to anorexia—the two are markedly different. "In a way bulimia is more dangerous," says Pan Fanaritis, who has coached women's track at Georgetown, Missouri and Villanova and is now the men's and women's coach at Denison. "Anorexia you can see."

1 sashayed: strutted

2 NCAA: National Collegiate Athletic Association, the rulemaking body of college athletics

What you see is frightening. Anorexia is self-starvation driven by a distorted perception of one's appearance. It is not unusual for an anorexic who is 5' 8" to weigh 100 pounds or less—and still think she's too fat. . . .

The long-term consequences of anorexia are catastrophic. Deprived of calcium, the body steals it from the bones, leading to osteoporosis. "I've seen X-rays where the bones look like honeycomb," says Fanaritis. "X-rays of an anorexic of four or five years and those of a 70-year-old are very similar." Anorexics have suffered stress fractures just walking down the street.

Bulimia is a binge-purge syndrome in which huge quantities of food—sometimes totaling as much as 20,000 calories in a day—are consumed in a short period of time and then expelled through self-induced vomiting, excessive exercise, the use of diuretics³ or laxatives, or some combination of those methods. Stomach acids rot the teeth of bulimics and, if they are sticking their fingers down their throats to induce vomiting, their fingernails. Their throats get swollen and lacerated.⁴ Electrolyte imbalances⁵ disrupt their heart rates. But since bulimics are usually of normal weight, years may pass before a parent, roommate or spouse learns the terrible secret.

"You can always find an empty bathroom," says one recovering bulimic who was an All-America distance runner at Texas. During her worst period of self-abuse she was visiting bathrooms five or six times a day, vomiting simply by flexing her stomach muscles. "It's like a drug," she says of the syndrome. "It controls you. An overwhelming feeling comes over you, like a fog."

In the 1992 NCAA survey 51 % of the women's gymnastics programs that responded reported eating disorders among team members, a far greater percentage than in any other sport. The true number is almost certainly higher. Moreno says he knows of five gymnasts on the national team who have eating disorders. Bob Ito, the former women's gymnastics coach at Washington, has estimated that on some of his teams 40 % of the athletes had "outright eating disorders." One world-class gymnast has admitted that while she was at UCLA the entire team

3 **diuretics:** medicine that increases the need to go to the bathroom

4 **lacerated:** cut

5 **Electrolyte imbalances:** a lack of sodium, potassium, and chloride needed to help the body retain fluids

would binge and vomit together following meets. It was, she said, a "social thing."

Anorexia offers a convenient antidote to what young gymnasts dread most—the onset of womanhood. Not only do anorexics keep their boyish figures, but many go months or even years without their menstrual periods, a side effect that contributes to osteoporosis. "This is a matter of locked-on adolescence," says Scott Pengelly, a psychologist from Eugene, Oregon, who has treated athletes with eating disorders.

No one knows that better than Cathy Rigby, who 20 years ago was the darling of U.S. gymnastics and paid for it with 12 years of bulimia. "As much as [the news of Henrich's death] makes me sad, it makes me angry," Rigby says. "This sort of thing has been going on for so long in our sport, and there's so much denial."

When Rigby competed, every story celebrated her girlishness, which she worked so hard to maintain that she pinned her pigtails back from her face, fastening them so tightly that she got headaches. And the image of the world-class gymnast as waif⁶ has only become more exaggerated in the two decades since. The average size of the women on the U.S. Olympic gymnastics team has shrunk from 5'3", 105 pounds in 1976 to 4'9", 88 pounds in 1992. At the 1993 world championships the all-around gold medalist, 16-year-old Shannon Miller, was 4'10", 79 pounds.

What chance would Vera Caslavskaya have had in such company? Caslavskaya, who won the all-around titles at the 1964 and '68 Olympics, was a geriatric⁷ giant by today's standards. In Mexico City the 26-year-old Czech was 5'3", 121 pounds. What's more, she and Ludmila Turischeva of the Soviet Union, who succeeded Caslavskaya as all-around champion, looked like women. Gold medal or not, Turischeva was upstaged in '68 by 13-year-old Olga Korbut, who was 4'11" and 85 pounds. Gymnastics has not been the same since.

At its highest levels gymnastics has evolved in a direction that is incompatible with a woman's mature body. That was plain when Nadia Comaneci, the darling of the 1976 Olympics, showed up at the world championships two years later having grown four inches and put on 21 pounds. She had become a woman, and as John Goodbody wrote in *The Illustrated History of Gymnastics*, "We learnt that week how perfection in women's gymnastics can be blemished by maturity."

6 **waif**: small, homeless child

7 **geriatric**: old; elderly



Henrich's career followed a pattern not unlike that of thousands of little girls who fall in love with gymnastics the first time they see it on television. Henrich started at the age of four. When she was eight she enrolled at the Great American Gymnastics Express in the neighboring suburb of Blue Springs [Missouri]. Al Fong, a 41-year-old former LSU⁸ gymnast, founded Great American in 1979, one year before Henrich joined. Even in a sport dominated by monomaniacal⁹ men, Fong's determination to produce champion gymnasts is extraordinary. "I work at this seven days a week," he told a reporter last year, "and I look forward to doing it for the next 25 years. It's an obsession with me."

Fong's elite gymnasts are renowned for the hours they train: one three-hour session at six in the morning and then four more hours at five in the afternoon. On meet days they are in the gym to work out two hours before the meet begins. "He pushed them really hard," says Sandy Henrich, Christy's mother. "He wanted them to train no matter what. He didn't want them to get casts [for fractures] because it took away their muscle tone."

For intensity Fong met his match in Henrich. Her nickname at the club was E.T.—Extra-Tough—and she more than lived up to it, competing with stress fractures and placing second all around in the U.S. nationals just three months after she broke her neck in 1989. "No one can force someone to train 32 hours a week unless they really want to," Fong said last week. "The sacrifices are too great. Christy worked five times harder than anybody else. She became so good because she worked so hard and had this kind of focus."

Henrich made sensational progress. In 1986, at age 14, she finished fifth at the national junior championships and competed in her first international meet, in Italy. In early 1988, when she finished 10th in the all-around competition at the senior nationals, her dream of making the U.S. team at that year's Olympics seemed attainable.

"What's a [high school] dance compared to the Olympics?" she said when she was 15. "It's what I want to do. I want it so bad. I know I have a chance for the Olympics, and that gets me fired up." But

8 LSU: Louisiana State University

9 **monomaniacal**: excessive concentration on one thought or idea

Henrich didn't make the Olympic team in 1988. She missed a berth¹⁰ by 0.118 of a point in a vault in the compulsories.¹¹

▲ ▲ ▲

In 1989 Henrich had her best year as a gymnast. She finished second in the all-around at the U.S. championships and fourth in the world championships in the uneven parallel bars. By that time she also had a serious eating disorder.

Its inception can be traced in part to an incident in March 1988, at a meet in Budapest, when a U.S. judge remarked that Henrich would have to lose weight if she wanted to make the Olympic team. Sandy Henrich recalls meeting her daughter at the airport upon her return: "The minute she got off the plane, the first words out of her mouth were that she had to lose weight. A judge had told her she was fat. Christy was absolutely devastated. She had a look of panic on her face. And I had a look of panic on my face. She weighed 90 pounds and was beautiful."

Henrich began eating less and less, an apple a day at first, and then just a slice of apple—this while continuing to work out six, seven hours each day.

In one important respect Henrich was different from many anorexics, who tend to live solitary existences. During her junior year at Fort Osage High she began to date Moreno, a friend of her older brother, Paul, and a wrestler on the Fort Osage team. "She was always very tough on herself," says Moreno, "and I could relate to that." Indeed, he recalls that Henrich got jealous when she learned that his body fat was 8%, while hers was 9%. "I had to tell her men just have lower body fat," he says. They got engaged in 1990 and were to be married later that year, but the wedding had to be postponed when Henrich fell ill. "She wanted to live in Florida and become a nurse," says Moreno.

Soon after they began dating, Henrich asked Moreno how wrestlers lost weight. "I told her we'd wear plastic. Run in the shower with the steam on. Take Ex-Lax. And," he recalls with a wince, "every one of the things I told her, she tried. That laid real guilt on me, but I had no idea she'd do it. I had always told her how stupid it was."

¹⁰ **berth**: place

¹¹ **compulsories**: in gymnastics, the round where certain techniques must be performed exactly

Moreno says Fong might have spotted the danger signals of anorexia and bulimia earlier. "I find it hard to believe Al would not notice that every day Christy would work out, run five miles and come back. She truly loved Al and would have done anything for him. He'd say, 'Tuck your stomach in. You look like the Pillsbury Doughboy.' "

Fong denies ever harping on Henrich's weight or making the Doughboy comment. "It's just not true," he says. "I've heard those comments. Where in the world does that come from?"

Moreno and Sandy and Paul Henrich agree that the blame for Christy's obsession with weight should not fall only on her coach. "It's the whole system," says Sandy. "No matter what you do, it's never, never enough. The whole system has got to change—parents, coaches, the federation."

Christy lived at home, and a former USA Gymnastics official suggests that her parents might have pushed harder for intervention. As Christy's weight dropped precipitously,¹² "they had to be aware of it," the official says, adding that the federation received no complaints from the family. Some of Henrich's friends question if they, too, should have seen the signs earlier.

Moreno has come to understand Henrich's compulsion. "Christy's also to blame for her perfectionist attitude," he says. "The disease strikes people like that. I can remember Christy telling me, 'There's only one first place. Second place sucks.' "

Gail Vaughn, the director of Reforming Feelings, a counseling service in Liberty, Missouri, worked with Henrich for six months. "Probably one of the things that worked against her most was that label, E.T.," says Vaughn. "She learned to deny pain. She competed in one of her biggest meets with a stress fracture. So when her body broke down and screamed in pain, she ignored it. Because she had learned to push past the pain."

▲ ▲ ▲

For women, eating disorders are "like steroids are for men," says Liz Natale, a recovering anorexic who was a member of the Texas team that won the 1986 NCAA cross-country title. "You'll get results, but you'll pay for it."

For a time you do get results. That's part of the seduction. As an athlete's weight falls, his or her aerobic power increases. And psychologi-

¹² **precipitously:** dropping steeply

cally there is no lash like anorexia. "To be a great competitor, you need that tunnel vision that anorexia feeds on," says Farrell. "Anybody who can starve herself can run a 10,000 really well."

But ultimately eating disorders exact a severe psychological toll. Distance runner Mary Wazeter was so tormented by constant thoughts of food that in February 1982, after withdrawing from Georgetown in her freshman year, she jumped from a bridge into the ice-covered Susquehanna River in her hometown of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Her suicide attempt failed, but she broke her back and will spend the rest of her life in a wheelchair. . . .

Regrettably, too many coaches see only what they want to see. Says Fanaritis, a college track coach: "How about the football coach who has the kid come back from summer vacation and he's gained 60 pounds and his neck has grown two inches, and the kid says, 'I lifted my a.. off'? It's the same issue. You're not the one who said, 'Go home and use steroids.' You're not the one who said, 'Get skinny so you can run fast.' But you're in that middle ground."

Spurred by Henrich's case, USA Gymnastics has begun to take measures seeking to help prevent eating disorders. Last year the federation measured the bone density of all 32 national team members and found that three of them had deficiencies. It says it is trying to teach young gymnasts that they can say no if they feel too much is being asked by a coach. But how realistic is it to expect children to stop themselves from doing something they love? Especially when, as famed women's gymnastics coach Bela Karolyi once put it, "The young ones are the greatest little suckers in the world. They will follow you no matter what."

▲ ▲ ▲

Christy Henrich was buried at St. Mary's Cemetery in Independence [Missouri]. A line of cars half a mile long moved slowly through the tombstones, which marked the graves of those who had lived 70, 80, even 90 years. For Henrich the time was tragically short. The inscription on her stone reads: 1972-1994. ☞



ingale 83